Breaking the Silence:
Dialogical Learning in the Middle Grades

By Jolanda Westerhof-Shultz & Jill Weisner

Introduction

In spite of the ongoing discussion and emphasis on student voice, talk curriculum, and small group discussion (Barnitz 1994; Johnson & Johnson 1994; Barnes & Todd 1995; Johnston & Nicholls 1995; Johnson & Johnson 2000), most classroom language/discourse strategies remain rooted in Socratic premises. That is to say, official classroom discourse still tends to focus on the individual presentation and recitation of knowledge, as opposed to its shared exploration and examination. By disconnecting thinking from talking, Socratic-based language activities or strategies treat reasoning and language as objective and exclusive. While Socratic-based language activities present certain advantages when used as independent strategies (and we identify some of these), we propose that the overwhelming effect of their exclusive use in the classroom is to discourage students from

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taking a more active and independent part in classroom discourse. The implication of this lack of serious participation, to their futures as adult members of a democratic society, is that students learn to let others examine issues, and make decisions on these, for them.

In practice, the Socratic method feels more like a test of one's abilities to predict right ideas than an open-ended and collaborative experience. Teachers who use the Socratic method can come across as patronizing and manipulative in terms of "leading" or directing the reasoning or thinking of students towards particular ends. And while its proponents may reject this criticism, discourse based on Socratic premises does not really help students articulate their own ideas, or understand — let alone appreciate — those of their peers.

In this essay we first describe five of the most common of these Socratic-based discourse strategies: Socratic method, radial discussion, presentation/lecture, debate and unstructured conversation. Next we introduce an alternative discourse model, the Deliberative Cycle, outline the five components of this Cycle, and show how these components can help teachers facilitate a more open ended and shared discourse. And finally, in part three, we provide data from a middle level language arts classroom that illustrates how students experienced a curriculum that possessed key elements of this Cycle.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of "monological" and "dialogical," as Habermas (1990) uses these terms, are key to understanding the contrasting modes of classroom talk that are the focus of this essay. A monological view of reasoning starts from the premise that thinking is what happens internally and prior to talking, and talking is the consequent reporting of these previously and independently constructed thoughts. It presupposes that knowledge is objectively true, and that one either has access to it or one does not. The "right" idea already exists in someone's head, and the point of any discussion is for this someone to persuasively present it to others. Grayson (2000) explains how, from this epistemological point of view, it is unnecessary, even a waste of time, for these others to share their own thoughts or ideas. This individualistic view of knowledge and reasoning encourages teachers and students to focus on reporting what has already been determined to be true, right, or worth knowing about the world. Thinking is perceived to happen internally and prior to talking, and talking consists of the presentation and recitation of knowledge.

In contrast, a dialogical mode of reasoning reflects a constructivist epistemology that presupposes knowledge to be subjective and in process. When individuals reason dialogically, they expect to figure out what they think through dialogue. And it is precisely because of this expectation that they regard knowing as a shared or social process, rather than a personal or private, endeavor. They do not begin with the assumption that words are definitive, or that anyone's position has to be settled

in order to be worthy of serious attention. Grayson (ibid) observes that while individuals in a dialogical context may still argue vigorously for their ideas, but the point is they do not spend all their energy promoting, defending, or campaigning exclusively for them. In other words, they know it is not possible to get the whole story by internal reflection alone, and they expect to change their views and refine their ideas as a result of discourse.

Of course, learning need not be dialogical to be meaningful or valuable. But as teachers in a democratic society, we are distressed that the educational balance remains skewed so heavily in favor of monological (presentational) over dialogical (deliberative) reasoning processes. We believe dialogical models, such as the Deliberative Cycle (Westerhof-Shultz 2002), can put open-ended inquiry at the center of the curriculum and thus make it possible for students to take a more active, independent and responsible part in classroom discourse.

The Socratic Method:

The Heart of Monological Classroom Discourse

The Socratic method teaches students to regard knowledge as fixed, personal and exclusive; it socializes them to take an oppositional/combative or passive stance towards knowledge and hence others and because of this it cannot effectively teach students to explore, examine and construct knowledge with a variety of others.

The five common classroom language activities or strategies rooted in the Socratic premises are the Socratic method, radial discussion, presentation/lecture, debate and unstructured conversation. As we shall show, each of these effectively persuades students to speak up only when their thoughts seem "worked out." Of course, students may revise their positions upon reflective engagement with others, but each of these strategies encourages them to keep any half-formed ideas to themselves, or wait until they can independently solidify and validate them.

Socratic Discussion

Socratic discussion begins when a teacher asks a question, the student then responds to the teacher, who then asks a follow-up question. Intentionally or not, the teacher is steering student responses or thinking in a direction that usually only the teacher knows about ahead of time. Because it assumes all knowledge is reducible to predetermined, right answers and that only a few can know what these right answers are or will be, Nel Noddings (2000) is right to refer to the Socratic method as "A sneaky way of telling." The Socratic method persuades students to adopt a cautious "hunt-and-peck" approach to knowledge by promoting the idea that the act of knowing is a step-by-step process in which student-subordinates are expected to match or predict what they think to what a teacher expects them to say. If the student is incorrect, the onus is on the teacher to quickly "fix" the mistake,

in a way that is likely to keep the focus on the next step to be taken. The Socratic method thus socializes students to regard mistakes as unnatural, avoidable, embarrassing and negative. It teaches them to depend on authority figures or experts to clear up confusions or solve problems. It does not teach them to address these thoughtfully and confidently for themselves and with each other.

Discourse strategies based on this method leave students in submissive and/or comfortably passive positions from which they bear little or no responsibility for its overall direction or quality. This is due in large part to the power dimension of this method. Teacher-, or expert-, directed discourse leaves students with the impression that only teachers do or should know the answers to the questions they pose. And especially after students voice an error or mistake, most will feel reluctant to offer tentative answers. Such controlled discourse may work for the few who are extremely confident in their understandings of the material and who are less fearful of possibly losing face. But most students will visibly withdraw from such restrictive interchange.

Radial Discussion

Radial discussion is a larger-scale Socratic discussion. Picture these teacher-directed conversations in terms of a bicycle wheel, with the teacher at the wheel's "hub" and the students as its many "spokes." The teacher first poses a question to an entire group of students and then proceeds by calling on specific students to answer it. Students rarely reason directly with one another. They are, once again, left with the impression that "good" discussions require expert direction and guidance and proceed in a predictably organized manner. Conversely, "bad" discussions are characterized by confusion and ambiguity, which are signs of poor management (leadership) or lack of ability (intelligence). This kind of discourse does not help them practice articulating an agenda, examining a range of conflicting views and beliefs for themselves and between themselves, let alone develop a sense of shared responsibility for the quality of their exchanges. An expert is still needed if for no other reason than to maintain "quality control" over what they learn and come to know.

Presentation/Lecture

In a presentation/lecture, one or more individuals share information or relate experiences to a group of designated listeners, typically based on some kind of prewritten script. The two main premises underlying this strategy are related to expertise and efficiency. Only that individual should speak who possesses the most knowledge or experience on a given topic, and when there is much material to cover and time is limited, information must be quickly and thoroughly distributed. The implication of this format is that students are not sufficiently knowledgeable or experienced to literally warrant much independent air space. Although there is often

a follow-up question-and-answer period, there is no need for the presenter to take their questions into consideration before speaking.

While a well prepared lecture may be easy and entertaining to listen to, it can also fortify false notions about an ordered and/ or order-able world in which everyone does or should agree; ideas are not challenged due to what can appear to be a "natural" lack of a variety of viewpoints. The problem is that when teaching amounts to telling, and learning to listening, students will tend to simply re-tell what they have heard, as opposed to offer proof that they have comprehended it. In a presentation/lecture only one line of reasoning is available to learners. The speaker in a very real sense serves as the knower for the group. He or she does all of the reasoning and presents the results of this reasoning to the others.

Debate

A debate is a rhetorical contest that focuses on arguments organized into key points that are presented to a public by representatives of what are typically two sides of an issue or question. The aim is to win converts to one's chosen side, usually through persuasive argument and/ or emotional, moving testimony. Debate thus consists of monological reasoners using their own previously constructed arguments to convince others of their point of view. The focus is not on deliberation but defense. This strategy rewards an individual's powers of persuasion over his or her ability to listen openly and respectfully to the ideas of others and talk collaboratively with them. The fact that this format leads participants to believe that there are always only two sides to an issue is probably its most dangerous feature because it tends to make instant adversaries of those who are set up from the start to oppose one another.

Admittedly, the ability to clearly articulate and compellingly defend an established position is a useful skill. But the problem, as far as participatory democracy is concerned, is that the inherently contestual nature of debate promotes a view of knowledge as inevitably predetermined and oppositional. The ultimate goal is not for participants to find common ground or an acceptable alternative position, and thus it can be very hard for participants to conceive of workable and satisfactory compromises. Debate thus precludes deliberation by encouraging participants to adopt combative and/ or passive postures, not only in relation to knowledge, but also to each other, and by explicitly communicating to participants that there is nothing of importance left to discuss. Debate cannot tap into the intellectual and social potential of dialogue. The monological underpinnings of this strategy discourage knowledge from being shared through a collaborative process of " give and take." This would make knowledge too tenuous and flexible.

Unstructured Conversation

In a monological classroom, students often believe that a teacher must, apparently, be present for meaningful learning to occur. In this context, unstruc-

tured conversation also dichotomizes thinking and talking. And it should come as no surprise, therefore, that students often feel it makes little sense to squander away classroom time in "chit chat," since it is already clear whose knowledge they are supposed to come away with.[1] In unstructured conversation, sub-groups of students freely talk among themselves. Sometimes they converse on a specific topic and other times their interactions are open ended and free-flowing. However, because the underlying monological premise of speaker-as-expert has not yet been dismantled, students tend to avoid putting their peers "on the spot," by asking them follow-up questions for instance. The popcorn-like nature of unstructured conversation is due largely to the absence of the teacher.

The Deliberative Cycle:

A Model of Dialogical Reasoning in the Classroom

If dialogical strategies are to be more fully implemented in the classroom, classrooms themselves must be regarded as democratic sites. This means going against the monological grain that views them as places in which the young and/or novice, like the dwellers of Plato's cave, must be told what to think and how to act. How might a more democratic shift be accomplished? We can start by imagining what would happen if knowledge were no longer regarded as personal or objectively true, but as subjective and something people create together. We could begin by seeing both students and teachers as thinkers and thus bringing something inherently valuable and useful to the discourse. We could realize that no one, not even the youngest or least knowledgeable, comes empty-handed (or headed). In other words, we could begin to treat learning more like the social, shared experience it is.

The Deliberative Cycle is one example of a dialogical mode of classroom discourse. It helps students learn to weigh competing positions for themselves by discussing these thoughtfully with their peers. What is immediately striking about this Cycle is the fact that everyone directly involved in its reasoning processes — students as well as teachers — contributes to and helps shape the discourse right from the start. The five components of this Cycle can be entered or exited from any point. These components and the dialogical premises underlying their use in the classroom are as follows:

Self Inventory:

What do I currently think and believe?

The point of this component is to invite students to articulate current understandings and beliefs as they relate to a given topic or issue. Self inventory is intended to make students both more aware of their respective positions, and the implications of these positions, and to acquaint them with alternate and competing possibilities.

Group Inventory:

What do others in this group think and believe?

The point of this component is to build or re-build a sense of community in the classroom by publicly acknowledging the various and different positions within it. Students present their current beliefs and positions to one another, usually in small sub-groups since these tend to be easier and safer venues for disclosure. There are no "right" or "wrong" positions; all views are acceptable at this point.

Agenda Formulation:

What are our questions and how do we currently answer them?

The point of this component is for students to generate questions for individual and shared inquiry by using the various views and experiences they have already articulated (Gastil 1993). When students have input in the overall direction of an inquiry they also share responsibility for its eventual quality and inclusiveness.

Expansion, Exploration and Finding Evidence:

What does a range of those more familiar with the topic or with a vested interest in it have to say?

In this component students explore and examine a range of positions, not simply to absorb or reject these positions, but to critically reason with those who hold them. Texts and other resources can play an especially important role at this point, since they can help students uncover those aspects of the agenda yet to be considered.

Synthesis, Reflection, and Evaluation:

What do I/we think now, and what new lines of inquiry have we generated?

The aim of this last component is for students to put the various pieces of their collaborative inquiry together, help assess the quality of this inquiry and draw "working" conclusions based on what they, as a group, have talked about and explored.

The components of this Cycle have been implemented successfully if student discussion is open-ended and inclusive, if those with differing views feel welcome to express these views, and if teacher and students share responsibility for carrying the discussion forward — that is, if they jointly develop ideas and explore them as a group, without expecting or needing everyone in the group to agree or reach the same conclusions. By way of contrast, monological discourse such as the various types of Socratic-based discourse critiqued above, is typically considered successful if there has been an efficient transmission of predetermined facts or sanctioned beliefs from the designated knowers/experts to novice/coming-to-know students. Because monological discourse is premised on the notion that knowledge is fixed,

it can confidently expect everyone coming away from the learning experience to reach similar conclusions, and this usually as a result of their having listened to experts draw and report these conclusions to them.

The Deliberative Cycle in Action:

Emerging Themes from a Middle School Classroom

The authors' shared interest in democracy and student talk was the starting point for a collaborative research project that used one of Weisner's middle level language arts classes. Westerhof-Shultz's data collection process involved field notes, student interviews, and videotaped class sessions. Weisner, involved in her own action research study, collected field notes, audio-taped group discussions, and conducted additional student interviews. What emerged from this joint effort were two, separate, yet very related research projects (Weisner 1999; Westerhof-Shultz 2002).

This section shows how middle level students experienced a classroom that possessed key elements of the Deliberative Cycle. Weisner constructed a discourse-centered curriculum that solicited student language (writing and speech) for the purposes of addressing the school curriculum, while at the same time inviting students to participate in a democratic process of self government. Her class was structured around a series of thematic units, Reading and Writing Workshop (Atwell 1997) and Talking Workshop (Weisner & Powell 1994). For instance, students chose, created, and restructured curriculum, made choices about writing and reading topics/genres, took an active role in running the "business" of the classroom (Language Lab), and used their own language to generate writing ideas, peer edit, make sense of texts, and sort through difficult concepts. These activities required students to articulate presuppositions, consider a range of possible options, conduct and evaluate independent and collaborative research in ways that reflect the five components of the Deliberative Cycle.

Three epistemological and political themes are evident from the classroom data, student interviews, and retrospective student interviews: (1) students were aware of their lack of effect in traditional, monological classroom contexts, (2) the Deliberative Cycle, as a mode of dialogical reasoning, does not mean lack of "control" in the classroom, and (3) the Deliberative Cycle fundamentally alters student behavior and expectation.

Students were aware of their lack of effect in traditional, monological classroom contexts

It is evident from initial as well as retrospective interviews that students were aware of the lack of effect they have in a traditional, monological classroom and they reported (first, as middle school students, and later, as high school students) that this lack of power resulted in their feeling a sense of irrelevance and insignificance to

the goings-on of the classroom. For instance, the following excerpt demonstrates how Shelly, as a middle schooler, experienced the dismissive nature of the monological classroom:

> Shelly: Teachers aren't worried about what we [students] think. They just do what they think and think what they think. They never ask your opinion and they don't know your opinion until they ask you. And they never ask you. . . . We shouldn't have to hold our feelings in. We should just be able to tell them what we think and if they don't like it that's fine as long as you get to speak your opinion. It just feels like you're an object. You're not important to what the teacher thinks. She just thinks that she has to tell you this and get you out of there and tell the next people. . . . (Weisner 1999, 175)

Shelly's impression of a monological classroom is that the teacher does not care about what she thinks and that she is "just an object" in that classroom. The teacher is perceived to speak from a script in which the knowledge and experiences of students are no part.

While we are not arguing that a monological approach to education is, by definition dismissive of students, our research illustrates that it tends to make students like Shelly feel invisible in the learning process. The following retrospective interview conducted in 2000 also illustrates the dismissive impact of a monological classroom. In this particular case, Deirdre's lack of verbal connection with her high school teachers resulted in her feeling indistinguishable and unimportant throughout high school:

> Deirdre: Teachers don't talk to me anymore. I just come into class, do their assignments, and get out of there.
>
> Weisner: Has that been all through high school?
>
> Deirdre: Pretty much.
>
> Weisner: So do you sit in the back of the room?
>
> Deirdre: When I get a chance. One teacher last year-when we changed seats at the beginning of the semester, I was sittin' on this [left] side in the back and switched over to this [right] side in the back. He's like, 'Are you a new student?' I'm like, 'No excuse me, I've been in your class for a whole semester.'[She laughs] He was the nicest teacher. I've always liked him, but he didn't know me. (March 30, 2000)

Even when they were middle schoolers, the students in Wesiner's study had an uncanny ability to articulate what it was like to not be a relevant, let alone vital, part of the classroom. And later, as high school seniors, they described classrooms in which they were seldom, if ever, invited to talk, make choices and hence take part in determining the direction of the classroom discourse. In the following excerpt, from a retrospective interview, another student expressed a common concern about not being allowed any say in her learning experiences:

> I didn't like it [one of her language arts classes] so much 'cause especially [__] grade

> I hated it cause everything was like so, structured like 'You have to do this' like she gave you everything you had to do and we had to do like so much reading and you got like 15 minutes and you had to sit there and write in this reading log, and you never knew what to write because she'd always give you a subject [....]. (March 21, 2000)

It was through the use of the Deliberative Cycle that Weisner was able to help her students learn to make responsible choices and evaluate they learned and how they learned it. It seems a given to point out that students are better able to learn when they are able to invest in learning processes that also invest in them and take into account what they think and have experienced. Whereas monological language practices privilege the voices of teachers and extant knowledge (vis a vis textbooks, for instance), dialogical approaches honor the individuality and value of both teacher and students. In a retrospective interview, Ken described the impact of Weisner's dialogical instruction this way:

> It was fun [in Weisner's language arts class] … because you never really felt like you were strange. […] it was like, you let your mind — playground time." (March 16, 2000)

The acceptance Ken felt encouraged him to be creative or, to use his words, it allowed his mind to have "playground time." The point to be made here is that this is due in large part to the dialogical nature of the learning processes Weisner facilitated. The students in this study, both as middle school and high school students, were aware of the contrast between those monological classrooms that staged the teacher at the center and those that respected student voice and capitalized on their natural interest in themselves, their peers, and the world.

The Deliberative Cycle does not mean lack of "control" in the classroom

Many educators are concerned about allowing students too much voice in the classroom. After all, things can get out of hand and student talk can get in the way of covering the required curriculum. However, from our student interviews, it became evident that students believed that the more "control" a teacher exerted in the classroom, the more likely they, as students, were to check out or fall behind. Carrie, as a middle school student, offers a useful insight on the negative impact of monological teacher control:

> If it's a silent room.... you have to sit up straight or the teacher won't call on you, can't talk unless you raise your hand. It's real strict. It's too quiet, too quiet. They have rules up there on the wall that you have to follow and I don't like that 'cuz I can't sit there for forty minutes. You can't talk or nothin' so how are you supposed to ask questions? You're not learning' much, just readin' out of a book. (Weisner 1999, 175)

The monological view of expert-as-sole-authority figure is at odds with the democratic concept of shared governance in the classroom. This connection between knowledge and responsibility became obvious in the interviews. The students in this study knew when their questions were welcome and whether their

experiences were a valuable part of the classroom. It should come as no surprise that when their knowledge and experiences are dismissed out of hand, students will often take a back seat when it comes to matters of classroom governance. On the other hand, the Deliberative Cycle provides students with authentic governance opportunities. Consider the following comments by a student in a retrospective interview:

> I remember we did a lot of things for that [Weisner's] class like we made up our own rules and we voted on that. I think that gave everybody chance to like-you had a set of rules posted for you, you got to make your own, and you think that everybody would say, 'Hey you can run around class and scream and yell' but we actually made like, actual rules and people actually made some difficult rules and you got to vote on it and it kinda like, gave everybody a voice. A lot of time, a lot of people felt like they actually made a difference with something 'cause they actually got to vote on stuff, so it kinda made everybody feel like they were a part of the class, you know they didn't just sit back and just go through it. (Erin, March 21, 2000)

A primary objective of the Deliberative Cycle as a dialogic instructional model is to make it possible for students to exercise thoughtful and authentic control over themselves and their classroom community—while they are engaged in activities that ask them to explore a range of positions and possibilities for themselves, listen carefully to other group members (especially those with whom they disagree), and develop their own informed conclusions. Just as the Cycle shifts the curricular focus from what a teacher or text or formal curriculum may want students to think, it also shifts the behavioral onus from teacher-centered control to student self government.

Authority shifts with the dynamics of the discussion. Because there are no prescribed conclusions, it would be unfair to expect the same person to direct and monitor every discussion, for instance. This idea of shared responsibility and collaboration contrasts sharply with the social and epistemological politics of small group discussion in the monological context, since by the time these participants are ready to offer their views, they are usually so invested in them that defense of what they consider to be their intellectual property becomes a more primal (if subconscious) goal than figuring out if an idea is, in fact, useful for the purposes of the group (if it can help build the discussion, for instance).

The Deliberative Cycle fundamentally alters student behavior and expectation

When the teacher, by definition, is always expected to know the right or acceptable answers and directly communicate these to students, students in turn do not expect to create or develop their own conclusions let alone listen to what their peers may have to say. Socratic-based methods, when used as a dominant model of instruction, thus counter-socialize students for participation in democratic decision-making processes. They prepare the young to focus on predicting and repeating the conclusions of authority figures.

Even when teachers facilitate cooperative learning groups (what we call

"unstructured conversations"), a Socratic seminar, or peer debate, authority is still tied to the teacher so there is little for students to value in the ideas their peers may express. It is as though the teacher's epistemological authority speaks so loudly that students cannot hear what they themselves or their peers have to say. The teacher is still the primary audience, and students still seek her/his approval and affirmation for their ideas.

In contrast, over the course of the academic year, Weisner's middle school students became less and less interested in pleasing her as the teacher and more concerned with facilitating their own learning processes in small and large groups. The following is an interview Westerhof-Shultz had with a group of these students when she was a researcher/observer in Weisner's class. Westerhof-Shultz was curious about how students viewed the "backstage role" Weisner took in the class meetings.

> Westerhof-Shultz: What's her [Ms. Weisner's] reason for not speaking up? Are you happy or not happy with the amount she speaks up?
>
> Ken: I'm happy with it. They're our [class meetings] mostly. She wants us to learn our own capabilities and not just the teacher's capabilities. She wants us to be independent with our [class meetings].
>
> Westerhof-Shultz: What do you think of that? [to Ely]
>
> Ely: I think that's true. At the beginning of the year, she had us make up our own rules. She's just tryin' to make us to be like adults. You know, not a little grade school teacher... I mean you haven't too many classes like that. I mean that you feel like a real adult.
>
> Westerhof-Shultz: What do other classes do that don't make you feel like an adult?
>
> Ely: Some classes, you need the teacher's help to do this, need permission to do this, say that...
>
> Westerhof-Shultz: Do you think she doesn't speak up because she thinks you don't need her help?
>
> Ken: Maybe because we're old enough so that we should get to work independently by ourselves rather than rely on the teacher to help us.
>
> Ely: I think the other teachers think we're too irresponsible and too immature.
>
> Ken: I think he's right about teachers thinkin' we're too immature. And I think Ms. Weisner she proved them wrong that we can be more mature than teachers in other classes think. (Weisner 1999, 161)

Ken thinks that Weisner "proved them [other teachers] wrong." He saw that the class was mature enough to work independently. Ken and Ely articulated a sense of self-confidence and self-awareness that they had in fact done something most middle school students do not have the opportunity to do. They understood why Weisner did not talk much in their class, and they had their own theories about why

other teachers typically do. They felt a sense of pride in that Weisner treated them like "adults" by allowing them to take real responsibility for their classroom experiences. Conversely, the two students recognized that when they are not given much decision-making authority in the classroom, this is an indictment of the low expectations held of them as students.

Dialogical teachers trust students because they have the means with which to hold students more accountable. Weisner was not passive or irresponsible, but in a very real sense her role is more transparent — she leads from the sidelines. She still plays a significant and key role, but she uses what she knows to build the capacity of students to engage and take responsibility for reflective collaborative inquiry.

The Deliberative Cycle was not an isolated strategy used in Weisner's classroom — it provided the key elements of its democratic culture. Most everything that happened in this classroom over the course of the year emerged from dialogical discourse. Whether students were planning curriculum, choosing and sharing novels, peer editing writing workshop pieces, or deciding on the parameters of the classroom rules, student language — and therefore reasoning — was at the center. Small and large group experiences were structured so that students participated in self and group inventory, formulated their own agendas, explored a range of ideas, put those ideas into action and subsequently reflected upon and evaluated them.

Weisner's dialogical approach to teaching encouraged students to talk when they otherwise would not have talked, but it also very importantly taught them to listen. In a retrospective interview, Amy observed the following:

> [The classroom] gave us an opportunity to discuss things that were-like among other people and to like prove our point without like, just blowing and just being like, 'Hey listen, I'm right.' 'Cause not everybody is right and you have to like, know that. (March 28, 2000)

In his retrospective interview Ken expressed a similar insight about the significance of learning to listen as a means of learning to formulate his own understandings. Said Ken to Weisner

> ... you gave me a little bit of experience [speaking in front of people], and you gave me a little bit of insight into what others think. . . so that kinda helped me, form my thoughts better when I did speak out loud. (March 16, 2000)

Importance and Limitations of the Study

Teachers who are dissatisfied with Socratic-based discourse, as critiqued in this essay, will be drawn to this Cycle that helps students deliberate or think for themselves and thus take more responsibility for their learning and actions in the classroom. Each component functions to make the thoughts and experiences of students an overt, visible and valued part of the classroom, and in this way develop the capacity of students to reason independently of the teacher and be effectively

self governing. Rather than lead students to believe they can reason it all out in their own heads, so to speak, the Deliberative Cycle — as a model of dialogical classroom discourse — shifts the focus from the individualistic defense of ideas to their joint examination and development. Reasoning in this Cycle does not occur in isolation, but always in relation to and with others. This Cycle is premised on the democratic notion that even the novice has the right to develop the intellectual and social skills that will make her a more effective self-governing member of an increasingly diverse society.

These pedagogical aspects are not new in principle, of course. Dewey once observed "all human experience is ultimately social: it involves contact and communication" (1938, 38). Still, as noted above, just because students engage in more or less dialogical contexts, such as small group discussions, does not mean they do not regard themselves as epistemologically atomized individuals. Small group discussion may simply represent an additional venue for student-experts to hold court. In his research on small group discussion, Pat Jones found that:

> ... many thirteen-year-old students approach discussion tasks in lessons with the assumption that what they are looking for are authoritative 'right answers.' Such students miss the opportunity to deepen their understanding of a topic by exploring cause and effect, by testing examples and exploring those that do not fit, by considering alternative explanations and evaluating them, and in general by relating new information to what they already know and understand. (quoted in Barnes 1993, 29)

Still, the research on small group discussion conducted by Douglas Barnes (1993) continues to hint at what a democratic society might expect if its young were regularly taught to reason more effectively together. Barnes concluded that:

> Children who have learned to value talk in their learning are more likely to explore beyond facts, into situations, causes, and consequences. [They] know more about the language in which knowledge is expressed; ... have a greater repertoire of learning strategies; ... have a greater insight into the relationships among bits of information; ...have a greater understanding of how they acquire knowledge; ...have a better understanding of the possibility of multiple solutions to problems or questions; [and] ... have a greater understanding of why they are working within a particular area of knowledge. (29)

Unfortunately, the widespread acceptance of instructional discursive strategies that defer serious, independent and sustained student voices suggests that, for the most part, most young people are not learning the kinds of cognitive skills Barnes describes. We think this is because monological reasoning undergirds most of what is generally taken as given or natural about classroom dynamics, and until its hold on classroom culture is unseated, efforts at involving students in collective deliberation or inquiry (such as through small group discussion) will continue to be unsuccessful. Students will continue to approach even small group discussion as yet another moment in which to passively absorb what others have to say or act like a teacher or expert by dominating the discourse.

It is important to note that a few students in Weisner's classroom resisted her dialogical orientation by asking for "more textbooks." It is unclear if their resistance indicated a deep dissatisfaction with a more dialogical mode of learning or if these students were in fact making the transition from a monological to a dialogical mode of learning. Still, such student dissatisfaction is worth noting, if only to remind us of the possibility that different students will experience dialogical learning processes differently. The following interview with one of Weisner's students conducted by Westerhof-Shultz is a case in point:

> Westerhof-Shultz: How are you doing grade-wise [in Ms. Weisner's class]?
>
> Rusty: Not very well! In my other classes I'm doin' alright, but this class it's just — like in English last year I could get an "A" every time, but this class seems hard. Ms. Weisner said [at the beginning of the year] it was the easiest class, but I think it's the hardest.
>
> Westerhof-Shultz: . . . but many students say it's the easiest. . . .
>
> Rusty: I thought it's been kinda hard all year round because I mean you really gotta try in this class. I mean it's really hard-for me anyway! The class has been kinda hard all year round because you really got to try in this class. I mean really hard! For me anyway. I'm just not used to it.
>
> Westerhof-Shultz: Is the class boring or is it just too hard?
>
> Rusty: What this class? Both — I don't know! It's just I don't like — I like Ms. Weisner and everything, I just don't like the way she teaches things. Don't teach nothin' really. I don't really think she teaches anything. (May 17, 1995)

When Weisner first heard the words, "Don't teach nothin' really. I don't really think she teaches anything" on the audiotape, she was disappointed and wondered what she had done wrong. Was Rusty right? Had she really not taught him anything? Had her efforts to tap into student knowledge and experience to make learning more meaningful been foolish in the case of a more traditionally-minded student like Rusty? Weisner listened to the excerpt several more times before she realized what she had been missing in the data. Teacher evaluation and affirmation of student knowledge and skill in language arts did not always appear in traditional ways, (i.e. a brilliant theme paper on Fahrenheit 451, improved standardized test scores, or effective use of metaphor in a poem). Instead, evaluation and affirmation emerged in more subtle ways — sometimes so subtle that the students themselves did not notice, in processes that were not isolated events, but were interdependent activities.

For example, fluency and voice in both writing and speech became stronger (i.e., students became more productive during Writing Workshop and group activities). Increased interest in reading (i.e., many students showed enthusiasm for Reading Workshop) and an improved ability to talk and write about what they read was evident (i.e., more lengthy and thoughtful entries in reading logs and discus-

sions related to texts). Most importantly, many students in the study reported that they found themselves more willing to take risks (i.e., giving class presentations and taking leadership roles), experiment with language (i.e., trying different writing genres and debating relevant issues), and use their voices to construct meaning (talk things out — curricular and social problems — in small and large groups). In short, Weisner's dialogical instructional and management strategies not only engaged students, they actually developed their language arts competencies.

The prevalence of monological discursive modes means most students are still socialized to treat knowledge as objective and exclusive. And for some students this will mean that unless the teacher is talking, that is, unless she is presenting herself as the designated expert in the classroom, they will view her as doing "nothin' really." However, Rusty's classmate Shelly seems to have astutely described the value of students taking up discursive space in Weisner's dialogical classroom when she observed, "You've got to join your views with the views of the others and what they think on the view.... Cuz, it might help you understand what you're thinking" (Weisner 1999, 193). In dialogical contexts, no one's ideas are accepted or rejected out of hand. Participants self-consciously regard their own comments, and those of others, as useful starting points to be inspected, revised or refined and expect the value and truthfulness of an idea to emerge as they talk with one another.

Conclusion

A dialogical view of knowledge and reasoning allows teachers and students to regard each other as co-contributors to a larger educational project that, to the degree it receives the input of everyone in the classroom, is intellectually richer and more relevant. There is an obvious and inherent pragmatic or anti-authoritarian quality to dialogical discourse. But as the students quoted in this essay explained, this does not mean there is no authority, per se. Students and teachers share responsibility for the content and direction of the discussion. They work together to find ideas or information that best take into account their differing needs, interests and beliefs.

Educators in this democratic society must rethink our tendency to inculcate an uncritical reverence for and singular focus on expert knowledge. After all, as citizens, students must know how to seriously examine a range of positions for themselves and to form their own views on issues of concern to them. Their time in the classroom should not socialize them to rely upon the mediated views and beliefs of others — no matter how authoritative or expert these others may be. Even the novice has the right to develop the intellectual and social skills that will make her a more effective self-governing member of an increasingly diverse society.

Note

[1] It is important to distinguish between the terms conversation and dialogue. A conversation tends to lack any explicit framework, is characteristically missing any overt purpose and is

voluntarily entered into. Ideas are accepted or rejected out of hand by the next person to speak, or, as is often the case, skipped over entirely. Dialogue, on the other hand, involves deliberation within a commonly understood framework and locus wherein questions and issues are collectively considered and talked about between people who have made some sort of commitment to the interaction. This is not to say that dialogue lacks spontaneity, just that it is much more intentionally entered into and consciously engaged in than conversation.

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